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Gila Community leader pushes for freeway study

Rhodes wants to determine impact on reservation despite opposition

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The governor of the Gila River Indian Community is continuing his push for a study of the pros and cons of putting the proposed South Mountain Freeway on the reservation, despite recent opposition from some council members.

Gov. William Rhodes wants to create a special committee to look at whether a freeway on or off the Gila River Reservation would hurt or help its increasing traffic congestion. He also wants to know how it would affect economic impacts and cultural resources, tribal spokeswoman Jeri Thomas said.

She said the governor isn't necessarily saying he supports or opposes putting the freeway on the reservation, but just believes that it's time for a thorough study.

"His position is that we need to know what the impacts are before we even say no (to a freeway)," she said.

The community council passed a resolution in August 2000 that prohibited a study or construction of a freeway because of opposition from residents and landowners in the reservation's District 6, where the freeway would pass through.

But a lot has changed since then, said Thomas, an Ahwatukee Foothills resident.

"Traffic has increased, and there are master-planned communities all around us," she said of the reservation.

Of special concern on the reservation is increased traffic on Beltline Road, which connects with Riggs Road in the Southeast Valley and becomes 51st Avenue in the West Valley. It gets about 9,000 vehicles a day, she said. The speed limit drops to 35 mph in a residential area.

"It is dangerous. Emergency vehicles have trouble getting to sites. Once you get behind those semi-trucks, you can't pass. There are all kinds of issues that haven't been talked about," she said.

To even study these issues, Rhodes must get around the 2000 council resolution that prohibits a study.

He has been trying to get a referendum that would allow a reservationwide vote so he can form a special committee to look into the feasibility of locating the freeway on the reservation.

Two council standing committees recently refused to forward a proposed referendum to the full 17-member council.

So now the governor is trying his second option, a citizens referendum. If a referendum petition is signed by 10 percent of the registered voters, or about 440 people, the feasibility study would be voted on in an election.

The proposed freeway would connect Interstate 10 in the Southeast Valley with I-10 in the West Valley.

Under its current proposed route, the freeway would run along Pecos Road in southern Ahwatukee Foothills and would force more than 100 homes to be destroyed and a canyon to be cut in the western end of the South Mountain range, an area the reservation's Pima and Maricopa Indians consider sacred.

Matt Burdick, spokesman for the Arizona Department of Transportation, said Thursday there is still time to select a route on the reservation because a decision on the freeway doesn't have to be finalized until fall 2007.

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